

Pittsburgh Private Schools | Sewickley Academy

A Love Letter to Toni Morrison

Written by [Kolia O'Connor](#) | 9/4/19 8:00 AM



Sewickley Academy Head of School Kolia O'Connor read the following remarks to faculty and staff during the 2019-2020 Opening of School Meeting in August.

Earlier this month, we lost a giant in American Letters: **Toni Morrison**. Toni Morrison was an inspiration to millions of people around the world for her courage, her artistry, her commitment to a view of the world that was transcendently humane and good, and her resistance to the pressure that she should be or write in ways not consistent with herself or her vision. There is so much that can be said about Toni Morrison and her impact on her readers and, through them, her influence on ever-enlarging communities.

I was one of those readers who was changed by reading Toni Morrison – and more importantly, by teaching Toni Morrison. Her great masterwork *Beloved* was published in 1987 and won the

1988 Pulitzer Prize. That fall, I taught *Beloved* for the first time, drawn into the world of Sethe, Paul D., Denver, and of course, Beloved herself. Morrison's prose – lyrical, demanding, and achingly beautiful – was used to share the most horrific details of degradation and suffering – as well as beauty and transcendence. Reading *Beloved* changed the way I see and understand the world and remains a touchstone for me in my commitment to the work of equity and inclusion.

It was Morrison who said, “The function of freedom is to free someone else.” She also said, “If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else.” I believe this is a challenge that each of us must take to heart, using our privilege and our power to make a positive, constructive, healthy, and affirming difference in the lives of others. It is the reason we became teachers or have chosen to work at a school: in our way, we want to make a contribution to the lives of others, and there is no more powerful way to do that than through education.

I understand the truth of Morrison's observation that, “We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives.” It is through language that we create the world, that we engage with others, that we exalt, or sadly that we denigrate. If anyone has seen the recent documentary about Toni Morrison, you will recall her story about being a very small child with her sister on the sidewalk in front of their house, scratching out letters and making words as they learned to read and write. One day, they were copying a two-word phrase they had seen down the street, carefully scratching out the F and then the U and as they work working on the C, their mother stormed out of the house yelling at them to stop what they were doing and to scrub the letters off the walk. Morrison comments that if words – if language – could move her mother to get so riled up, they must be powerful indeed. She, of course, became a master of language, using it to tell stories she wanted to read.

As we go about our work this year, let us be ever mindful of the power of words and language. The words we choose and how we use them matter, for, in the choice of words we use, we are defining the world in which we want to live and in which we want our students to live. So in this way, let us be inspired by Morrison's example and her legacy, and let us seek to empower others and let us seek to make a positive difference in our corner of the world.

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